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ABSTRACT

In a required class on literature and composition at Eastern Illinois University, students learn about the short story by writing one of their own. Their stories then become the context for an introduction to literary terminology such as point of view, setting, and use of dialogue versus narration. Having just written their own stories, students know that these terms designate real decisions and they see that these choices affect how, as readers, they now understand the stories. For the second assignment, students write a one-page analysis of their own stories in which they discuss their own work in the third person, showing how narrative technique, characterization, setting, dialogue, and plot structure all contribute to the story's impact. This forces them to recognize the dual role of their writing as at once something they did and the object of someone else's perception. The third assignment is a more formal, graded essay analyzing one story in their anthology from the standpoint of a single issue. With this assignment they realize how creative analysis is an act of complicity and cooperation between author and reader, not the passive appreciation of another's greatness. Teaching composition and literature appreciation simultaneously encourages inventiveness in both. (SRT)

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# Writing Stories and Writing Skills

Ruth Hoberman

When I came to Eastern, I had had seven years of graduate training in literature and five years of teaching experience in composition. I was dying to teach literature, of course, but in many ways I felt most comfortable with composition: I had a repertoire of methods and assignments, and a well-defined sense of why what I was teaching was important. Teaching literature I had none of this; I only knew I loved literature, and I assumed my enthusiasm was catching--and worth catching. In upper-level courses, the assumption worked fine. In our second semester composition class, called "Literature and Composition," it didn't. These were not English majors, but freshmen taking a required composition course, and unless I could figure out how reading literature could contribute to their writing skills, I was in a very awkward position with those who just plain didn't like reading poetry, short stories, and plays.

I haven't entirely worked out all these questions, and I still find Literature and Composition the hardest course to teach, but I do have some things I believe now about how literature and composition are related. Mainly, I've tried to let my practical experience with composition and my theoretical training in literature mingle, so that I can take advantage of both points of view at once. I don't think I'm alone in this; it seems to me that teaching composition and literature simultaneously encourages inventiveness in both. Nor

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are the difficulties in teaching them all that different.

Student writers (and readers) are often overwhelmingly passive in the face of others' written words. If it's in print, it must be good. If it's in their anthology, whether an essay or literature, they can't possibly do as well. They perceive writing not as an action, a process of making choices within the bounds set by grammatical and stylistic conventions, but as a magical precipitation of words onto page, which they can confront only as fait accompli. This passivity is deadly. Writing well involves recognizing one's own freedom to choose, discovering the pleasure of construing one's own version of reality. It means being able to perceive oneself as a "writer"--whether published or unpublished--doing "writerly" things with words.

My role, then, is to break down the barrier between the students' sense of identity and their perception of what it means to be a writer. And in many ways it's easier to break down in relation to "literature" than to nonficton. Most students I've seen would rather write stories than essays. They find "creative" writing less threatening and more involving. Their reasons for this aren't exactly good: they generally believe that creative writing involves only the outpouring of strong emotions, that it's more spontaneous and therefore easier than expository writing. But their reasons don't matter, nor does it matter how good their creative writing is, for I use the creative assignment not as an end in itself, but as part of a series of assignments in which it plays a useful but limited role.

For three semesters now, I've asked students in my Literature and Composition class to start off our study of the short story by writing their own. This comes a third of the way through the semester, after our study of poetry. I will not grade them on the story, I announce; the assignment is pass-fail and feels to them somewhat like a vacation. From the start, then, I've put them in a position parallel to those they read: they have experienced the freedom of authorship to put whatever they like on the page.

Within limits, that is. For the most important thing, and I think one of the hardest, for inexperienced writers to absorb, is their own paradoxical position as both choice-maker and automaton: as authors they are free to choose one word over another, to emphasize one detail over another; as language-writer they must submit to the dictates of grammar and convention, to the constraints of being read (in a sense written) by another.

Within a week of beginning to read anthologized stories by professional writers, students hand in their own--having received virtually no advice on how to do it. Their stories then become the context for my introduction of literary terminology; I spend time reading them aloud, and after each I ask about point of view, setting, use of dialogue versus narration. Terms like these are a lot less dry and abstract when used from the writer's viewpoint. Having just written their own stories, students know that these terms designate real decisions; whether they knew it or not at the time, they chose between 3rd person and 1st person narration; they decided when to break from narration into scene, or how much

to tell about a particular character. They can see that these choices affect how, as listeners, they now understand the stories. "What kind of mood does the setting create?" I might ask. Or, "Does the fact that the narrator is watching children play as he reminisces somehow tie in with the story as a whole?" One student wrote a story about a punter who had just broken up with his girl friend. The protagonist spends the entire story in an arm chair, his arms crossed, refusing to turn on the light in his dorm room. Asked why he had had his character refuse to turn on the light, he said it just happened that way. When the class informed him that it symbolized the character's sorrow and withdrawal, he was flabbergasted.

As writer, he had to some extent been written by forces beyond his understanding or control. As reader, though, he had just discovered the writer's power to manipulate: he saw how he could move from doing it by accident, to doing it on purpose. It is this recognition of the patterns and potential set up by one's own writing as it appears on the page, that I think is most essential to progressing as a writer and to sharing in the excitement of writing.

The best way to do this is to experience one's own writing simultaneously as one's own and as someone else's--as an activity and as an object for analysis. Step two in my sequence of assignments, then, is for students to hand in a one-page analysis of their own stories in which they discuss their own work in the third person, showing how narrative technique, characterization, setting, dialogue, and plot structure all contribute to the

story's impact. They have also the option of rewriting their stories--for fun, or to make them more analyzable--and many do. They have generally had some experience analyzing assigned authors in other classes. They understand the assumptions that go with it: that the author under discussion must be a Great Writer and that everything in the story must fit together perfectly. They know their own work is not "Great" and does not fit together perfectly. But they approach the task with good-nature and often with humor: if they know their stories don't hold together as tightly as a professional's, they are willing--even eager--to point out what <u>does</u> work: their use of setting to create mood, their use of foreshadowing, or recurring images. They enjoy playing the dual role of "great author" and "critic," and they are forced to recognize the dual role of their writing as at once something they did and the object of someone else's perception.

The third stage in this assignment is a more formal, graded essay: an analysis of one of the anthologized stories from the standpoint of a single issue: I ask them to pick some choice the author made regarding point of view or characterization or setting and show how it reinforces the author's point in the story as a whole. End of semester evaluations reported that traditional as this assignment was, students found it one of the most enjoyable. I suspect that at this point they realized that the roles of "great author" and "student" were more interchangeable than they had realized. Analyzing a "great work" no longer meant saying, "O

great writer look at all the ways in which you are great and I am nothing." It offered the potential to identify--to put oneself in the writer's shoes and ask, "Why did I do that?" and, that question's correlary, to put oneself in the reader's shoes and say, "I don't know if you knew what you were doing, but here's what you did." And just as the students, in writing of their own stories, were made aware of the creative choices they made even as analyzers (omitting the loose ends of their stories, emphasizing the choices that worked), they could now see all analysis as the creative act it is--an act of complicity and cooperation between author and reader--not the passive appreciation of another's greatness.

What does all this do for students' writing in general?

Most obviously, it forces students to impersonate their readers and see their own work as if someone else had written it. They complain about the difficulty of this; but the very difficulty of the task brings home the reality of these differing roles. Students whose essays lacked adequate development and transitions, whom I had already advised to be "kinder to their readers," are generally the ones who have the most difficulty with the assignment; in telling me how hard it was, they often articulate exactly what they most need to know to improve their own prose: that readers and writers approach a text from different angles; that it's hard but essential to put yourself in the reader's shoes.

More sophisticated writers, who already know this, still

need practice in reading their writing through others' eyes. Recognizing the good stuff in a piece of freewriting, for example, means appreciating striking word choices or discerning a potentially effective structure in words written without forethought. The writer must be able to move, in other words, from being writer to being reader, and being reader of writing means being an analyzer of what works, of how things fit together. As good writers move from draft to draft, they move away from the tyranny of their initial subject and the words they initially used to describe it; they must be able to recognize what's most effective in what they've done and go with it to some extent--feel, at any rate, the pull of literary and formal considerations, the appeal of the well-turned sentence or neat pattern.

To insist on too absolute a distinction between composition and literature, between essays and stories as reading material, is to deny students this experience. As a teacher of writing, I take for granted the role of language in not only transcribing experience but in constituting it. I take it for granted that "essays" and "literature" are not entirely separate entities. Writers of fiction and nonfiction alike shamelessly shape their versions of experience as they notice patterns and structures emerging. Students also should feel this fun and this power--the glee of simultaneously writing and reading, of seeing the story's shape and thinking, "Hey, this is great," even as they refer in their heads to the actual facts and try to get them right. The experience of creation followed by the perception of patterns and

structures in one's own writing that can now be followed through on: these seem to me the mental exercises intrinsic to good writing.

One student this semester handed in a rather formless story about three girls eagerly anticipating, then going on, a trip to an amusement park. As they go through a haunted house, though, one girl faints from terror, and they rush home. When the author rewrote it, she added an incident at the start: one of the girls sees a group of children playing around a fire hydrant. One child, held under the hydrant by an older boy, becomes hysterical. In her analysis, she pointed out the parallel; in both cases, apparent play suddenly became serious. Without any prompting other than the discussion of a few stories in class, a not particularly fluent, enthusiastic, or self-confident writer had done something very literary: added an incident out of purely formal considerations. It seems to me she has understood something important about her own writing in general: that it has an existence apart from her, and that as it exists apart from her, the interrelationships among its parts are more important than the essay's relation to her own actual experience.

Rosemary Deen and Marie Ponsot are getting at something similar, it seems to me, when they write of "the first pleasure of structure, the sense of closure, with which we recognize the completion of a whole" (16). They're describing the sense of satisfaction students gain from writing fables when they

see that what they have done has a recognizable structure. Students at this point, they write, even if they're not sure they've done it right, will somehow feel "they have really written something." Similarly, many of my students, analyzing their stories in the light of what they now knew about others' stories, found unsuspected structures and patterns--found, in fact, that they had "really written something." Some were genuinely excited. One of my favorite analyses is of a plainly autobiographical story about a young man leaving home for college. There are a number of things that appeal to me about it: for one thing, I detect the influence of Lawrence's "Rocking Horse Winner," an early assignment, on both story and analysis. Reading stories, I suspect, facilitates the recognition of schemata resembling them. Clearly "Rocking Horse Winner" helped this writer formulate his protagonist's (and perhaps his own) relationship to his mother.

But I also like it particularly because the author confessed to me that he had altered his story in the process of writing his analysis; the switch from "my bed" and "my walls" (designating his room at home) to "this room," (designating the dorm room to which he felt no connection), came only after the analysis had suggested such details could be important.

Having recognized the freedom of the fiction writer to employ the smallest detail as a vehicle of his meaning, this writer can now write expository prose with an analogous, if not equal, sense of power.

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